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ABSTRACT

One teacher's experience with changes in writing skills and attitudes while teaching writing led to studies of the experiences of three female graduate student writing tutors with widely varying backgrounds working in a university tutorial service. One was a student from a blue collar family who had entered college as a mature student; one had previously been a nurse; the third had a solid academic background with coursework in linguistics and writing. It was found that their teaching experience during the school year significantly changed their own writing processes and their attitudes about writing. Each tutor had an individual style and continued to develop her own repertoire of writing strategies. The tutors found that despite differing backgrounds and proficiency levels, the conceptual tasks in writing became more complex. The study emphasized how active engagement in teaching writing is a rich source of information about the writing process for the teacher as well as for the student. (MSE)

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How Teaching Writing Can Affect Our Own Writing Process

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Introduction

Several years ago, while doing graduate studies in English Literature, I had the opportunity to work as a tutor for Carleton University's Writing Tutorial Service. The experience had many benefits—the least expected, however, and yet the most enduring, was the degree to which it affected my own writing process. Suddenly I found myself creating richer, better structured, more articulate papers.

The transformation, nevertheless, was not an easy one. There were many false starts, stops, and even regressions. At first I became so overwhelmed by my exposure to the teaching of writing as process-centred rather than product-centred that the very act of putting pen to paper became an awesome one. The trouble was not so much in the "what" to say, but more in the "how." I was paralyzed by the endless possibilities, by the exemplastic nature of language, the many semantic changes that could be made on the word, sentence, paragraph level, and on to the first through to the last draft. Indeed, the heightened self-consciousness and the heady power that came of being able to name the facets of the writing process did more to discourage than encourage fluency.

Yet as the academic year progressed, strategies which I introduced to my students such as writing to discover one's meaning, using talk as a heuristic, and allowing for incubation periods between drafts provided valuable litmus tests which helped to feed and support my own efforts. And eventually my many stops and starts bore fruit. It all seemed to have been a part of a necessary stage of growth—a certain Piagetian decentring of the self—during which time the heuristics enabled me to move out and beyond myself, to view things from others' vantage points and to see things not just for what they were, but more significantly, for what they might be.

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Soon I began to wonder if this was the case for other tutors as well. Consequently, I decided to conduct a study investigating potential changes in the attitudes and processes of three of the next year's tutors. The following, presented as three separate case studies, is a synopsis of my findings.

Background

The three tutors involved in this pilot study were all female volunteers, and graduate Fellowship students who were required to do a great deal of writing as part of their course work; otherwise, they were from totally diverse backgrounds. One was a "mature student" with grade nine education, another had been an R.N. before attending university, while the third had a solid academic background with courses in linguistics and the "writing process."

At the beginning of the academic year the tutors attended a workshop as part of their training for the Writing Tutorial Service during which time they were given an introduction to the theory of creativity, the composing process, recent research findings, as well as a bibliography outlining the most pertinent studies in the field of writing (Freedman, 1984). Then, with theory in hand, the tutors were in a position to explore the pedagogical implications and begin to apply them to the various writing problems students may have.

The subjects were first interviewed after this training session, but before they began their teaching duties, and then again several times throughout the school year. Each tutor's profile is prefaced with a description of her socio-economic background as well as a summary sketch of her personality. Included also are their initial thoughts and feelings about being a tutor because I believe their responses would reveal, to a great extent, what they considered the act of writing to be, thus helping to flesh out their personal writing profiles. All in all, what quickly became apparent as the tutorial year progressed was that the teaching of writing can and does affect our own writing process—regardless of one's own particular level of discursive maturity.

Tutor Profile #1: Brenda

Socio-economic Background and Personality Profile

Brenda came from a blue collar background and was the first of her family to attend university. She left high school at the end of grade nine and after a varied work history, which included everything from driving a tractor-trailer to working as a medical secretary, she entered university as a mature student. She completed an undergraduate degree with a

major in English and a double minor in Sociology and Psychology, and then enrolled in an M.A. programme in English.

There was little emphasis placed upon reading or the exploration of ideas in Brenda's home life and very few things were "givens": she was responsible for creating her own centre of academic reference. She was truly self-made and justifiably proud of it. Yet, perhaps because of her difficult self-genesis, she tended to be untrusting of others, and even somewhat rigid in her views. At first she was reluctant to talk about the content of her writing, to share her "ideas." To a certain extent this was because of the "unfriendly" atmosphere she encountered at the last university she attended. However, it could also have been due to the fact that Brenda had to work so hard to develop her own ideas that she was either unwilling to share them, or did not really trust her own authority, and consequently did not want to expose herself to criticism unnecessarily.

Writing Process Before Tutoring

Brenda was fairly confident about her own writing capabilities but was at a bit of a loss when asked to articulate what she thought it would be like teaching others. "How the hell can you tell anyone how to write?—I guess perhaps by starting with the thought that everyone needs confidence." She found no aspect of the writing process any more difficult than the others. She did, however, require as much time as possible for each assignment (eg. six weeks for a fifteen to twenty-five page paper).

Once she decided upon a topic, she did extensive research of the primary and especially of the secondary texts—often writing out large chunks of the critical texts "verbatim." This seemed to be the formula she used to give shape and sense to her own ideas. Not particularly confident about her own powers of selectivity, nor her ability to formulate theories, she needed to amass a great deal of "what others have to say." Indeed, it was perhaps a way not only for Brenda to acquire ideas, but also to find the appropriate clothing, or vehicles for the expression.

After having amassed "reams of notes" she took them through several reduction processes and shaped, selected and organized her material to meet the needs of her topic. Eventually she made a "sketchy outline" indicating relevant supporting material. Then she allowed the material an incubation period of several days.

By this point, three-quarters of the time allotted to the essay had been given over to the generation and exploration of ideas. Then she would start the actual drafting, writing long hand and double-spaced. She could not really state the usual number of rough drafts she wrote, but knew that she spent a lot of time making a myriad of changes from the word level

to the actual structure of the piece itself, and would "cut and paste" when warranted to improve the overall meaning. Once the good draft finally evolved, and still working long hand, she turned her attention to mechanical changes such as spelling and punctuation. Then she typed up her draft, making no changes at this stage, and finally the paper was ready for submission.

What Tutoring Taught Brenda About Her Own Writing Process

Through talking and working with her students, helping them become more aware of different writing strategies, Brenda suddenly realized that the amount of work she put into a project was not really "goal-directed." I sat there and thought, "what am I copying this page verbatim for when I don't even know what it says—and all because I think it might be important." She decided to "take a chance and not do as much research. It's fantastic! It really is! I have more lists now, it's taking more time because I'm being more cautious that I don't leave anything out and because I am changing my method. Before, I'd get at least 70 pages of notes before I would even say there *must* be *something* in there?! It's a more aggressive approach. It's no longer getting all these quotes—and then having to pad around them."

As a result of encouraging others to actively engage with their material and to have confidence in their own thoughts and intuitions, Brenda realized that she needed to heed her own advice. By the end of the school year she felt more satisfied with, and more in control of her writing. She spent less time needlessly copying chunks of prose. And rather than amassing pages of notes per text, she had only four or so more meaningful ones.

Faced with having to do a new assignment, the research for her thesis topic, she did, however, momentarily regress. "With the first critical text I wrote it out word for word. I had almost thirty pages of notes." Nevertheless she recovered quite quickly and "with the next few books I became more selective: I tried to make general statements with a few quotes." When last I spoke with her, she was very pleased and confident that her thesis would be finished well within the deadline that she had set for herself.

Tutor Profile #2: Joan

Socio-economic Background and Personality Profile

Joan came from a middle class background and was one of the first of her family to attend university. As a child she was encouraged to read and use the local library although there was not a great deal of attention

paid to the exchanging of ideas, nor to writing. After high school she became an R.N., worked for a year, and then decided to attend university with the intention of eventually teaching nursing. During this time she studied philosophy and English and "loved it." She went on to complete a degree not in Science but in English, and then went on to do a M.A. in Canadian Studies, focusing on Canadian literature and history.

Joan was a dedicated worker, though not particularly self-confident: she always seemed to feel the need to apologize for, or qualify her statements. Nor was she given to acting spontaneously. She approached life and new ideas with great caution and, on the whole, felt safer acting methodically and operating within a highly-structured frame of reference.

Writing Process Before Tutoring

Joan liked writing but found it difficult—"it doesn't pour out, I almost have to be forced into doing it." Nor did she ever really feel in control. More often than not she was haunted by the nagging question: "Will I ever be able to get something completed?" She greeted the prospect of teaching writing with the thought that "When you teach something you can't help but learn." She was afraid, however, to deal with the question of grammar. Her knowledge of grammar was intuitive; therefore she bought several grammar and composition books hoping to "bone up," but found them "too boring to read." She set the books aside and decided that if she was unable to help her students see their problems *then* she would "give them something *they* can read."

Once Joan selected her topic for an assignment she began her research by examining primary and secondary sources, guided by her topic choice. Each notation was written out in full sentences and accompanied by the appropriate page number. After her research was completed, which normally took two-thirds of the time allotted for the assignment, she transformed her notes into a highly formalized outline, beginning with a thesis statement and followed by supporting points and quotations.

Eventually she turned the outline into the first and *only* draft. She wrote longhand and single-spaced, and had to start with the first paragraph of her introduction. As she proceeded she waited for each ideal word, phrase, sentence and paragraph. After much labour the piece was ready to be typed and at this point she did little or no correcting save to add or delete a line.

What Tutoring Taught Joan About Her Own Writing Process

Several months into the school year Joan admitted, "I have a fairly orderly way of approaching writing and I know it puts a lot of pressure

on me." It was not until she was faced with an assignment in a new discipline, however, that she felt the need to abandon some of her old writing strategies. The task was to compare a biographical to a narrative account of history and it was her responsibility to decide which of her findings were pertinent. There were no critical texts to turn to and she found herself "collecting a mass of notes" and "paralyzed by all the information."

Forced to chart her own territory, she decided that her only option was to begin writing in order to discover what it was she wanted to say. It was, indeed, a case of Britton's "shaping at the point of utterance" (Britton, 1980:24). First she tried to list all the points that interested her and then she narrowed her focus to two areas. This then became a "sketchy outline"—a very different approach compared to the highly-wrought product she was used to producing.

With this done she thought, "I'll just start writing again and see what happens." Not prepared to throw all caution to the wind, she continued to single space her writing but she no longer waited for the "right word." If something displeased her, her internal editor merely underlined things she felt were awkward at the time. "I had to keep saying to myself, this draft you are just working on ideas." All in all, she "was surprised it turned out so well—it still needs polishing—nevertheless, I've never written an essay so quickly." Nor had she "ever had an essay this far along with a week to go. I'll put it away and then come back to it."

Soon this change in writing strategies began to spill over even into familiar territory for Joan. In attempting to develop a thesis for a lengthy Canadian literature paper she "sat down and tried to write out some thoughts. It was very helpful and I was very excited about it because I had never done this for an English paper before." She started keeping a journal of ideas for this new paper because "I guess I was so overwhelmed with what I had to do, and there were so many conflicting ideas, I thought at least I'll be keeping track of my own questions."

Committed though she was to her new writing strategy, Joan felt it had not worked for her history paper and she was "not sure why." Ultimately, when written for a university course, the measure of a paper's worth is in the mark it receives. In this case it received a B rather than an A. Needless to say, there could be many reasons for this result. Perhaps the paper was awarded less than she had anticipated due to insufficient time dedicated to the exploration and organization of her ideas, and the failure to present them as cogently and precisely as her professor desired. Then again she may not have been aware of all the rules one must follow to give a discipline, in this case history, its desired written identity. The acquisition of a new discipline, as we have come to realize, particularly

with recent research tracing the performance of first-year law students, is a highly complex affair. The writer has to make many, many decisions, adjustments and assimilations on the conscious as well as the subconscious level. (Freedman et al, forthcoming). Indeed, John Dixon succinctly states the case when he says "certainty about language is, in a sense, certainty about experience" (Dixon, 1974:93).

Regardless, instinctively Joan realized that she was breaking new and valuable ground. She persevered and continued to keep a journal of ideas for Canadian Literature. Just like Brenda, by the end of the tutorial year Joan felt more in control of her situation and she intended to keep recording her ongoing thoughts because "it forces you to clarify and to see your problems."

Tutor Profile #3: Anna

Socio-economic Background and Personality Profile

Both Anna's parents were professionals whose mother tongue was Polish. By her account, she spent an almost idyllic childhood—a time filled with reading, poetry and music. Writing had always been an important part of her life as well, and for as long as she could remember she had kept a diary and written poetry. In high school she took extra courses in writing, and her undergraduate work was in English and Linguistics. Before starting her M.A. programme in Canadian Literature she spent two years in Africa with CUSO teaching ESL.

Anna was a very conscientious student. Articulate and perceptive, and highly committed to conversation, she was always more than ready to explore ideas, the particulars of her individual courses, and the nature of her writing process. She had an eclectic nature and more so than the other tutors, her main motivation seemed to be her insatiable curiosity for knowledge.

Writing Process Before Tutoring

Unlike the other two tutors, Anna had taken an undergraduate course with Dr. Aviva Freedman exploring the writing process. Because of this experience Anna was very conscious of the complexities and the links between reading, thinking and writing. In the past she had always kept a diary, but after taking the above course she felt she had been given "permission" to expand it into a journal in which she could explore her ideas. She was anxious to be a tutor and wanted the opportunity "to bring out things students have" and make them "more aware of the process." She felt that it took a long time to "gain control of her own writing," and as a tutor she could "aid in giving others this direction."

In general, Anna was fairly confident about her writing. However, to write effectively she had to have the following—as much time as possible, and the tension that is created by a deadline. Unlike the other tutors, she mentioned that her topic choice was always guided by the professors' preferences, which she gleaned through deduction and intuition. In fact, Anna had a heightened awareness of her audience—a crucial dimension of effective writing and often one of the last to be acknowledged and developed. She spent a great deal of time discussing with me what she felt her professors and the individual disciplines required of her, struggling to articulate her thoughts so that they would best suit those expectations.

After her topic was chosen, Anna turned to her primary text(s). During her first reading she normally made notes and, guided by her topic, marked relevant passages. At the same time she jotted down pertinent thoughts that came to mind. Nor was this an exercise that was limited to just her "writing time": she was well aware that her topic could pop into her mind at any moment and tried to be ready to record whatever suddenly and consciously surfaced from her creative unconscious. Therefore, "even a tiny, yet pertinent scrap of paper" might be added to the "pile" of information that she gathered for an assignment. She rarely went to secondary sources, and then only after most of her thoughts on the topic had jelled.

Once her research was completed, Anna went back and re-read her notes and the marked passages with the purpose of establishing some sense of direction. Ideally, the material suggested its intended sense and shape. Then she wrote not a point form outline, but more a sketch of her intended thesis and the areas she would cover. She wrote long-hand, double-spaced, and had to start with her introduction as her "way into" her material. Even if this introduction was eventually scrapped, it was a necessary exercise, an outline, that helped her chart the territory she intended to cover. Finally, Anna wrote as many drafts as she thought were necessary and would even make changes—mechanical as well as structural —while typing the final product.

What Tutoring Taught Anna About Her Own Writing Process

By the end of her tutorial year Anna could point to two major changes in her writing process. The first was that she tended to give her drafts more incubation time. She had allowed for some such time in the past (although it is noteworthy that it was not something she mentioned as being a part of her writing process at the beginning of the year), but now, as she says, "I see the degree of time as being more important." And second, "because of being more conscious of the writing process, I feel

I've been more successful in separating myself as writer from myself as critic." For instance, there were times when I'd think, "Oh! that doesn't sound right" and would immediately attempt to revise, thus jeopardizing the flow of creativity. Or she felt somewhat inhibited and "just didn't allow myself to engage in writing to discover. Now I just aim to get there, to write to a certain point and then go back and look at it critically."

On the whole "I write a bit faster" says Anna, "but the process is longer—I spend more time and they are better papers." Nevertheless, after her year as a tutor, she finds writing an even "greater burden" now. Other than wanting "to succeed and do an ultimate job," there is also the added dimension of being "more aware of the complexities involved. And I think of the time you spend, of the possibilities for people coming here to the Writing Tutorial Service—and then you start to think of the possibilities for yourself—it snowballs!"

Conclusions and Implications

We can see then, that as a result of teaching writing, each tutor did change her writing process significantly. And it was the experience gained teaching in the tutorial service that afforded the tutors a greater mastery over their craft.

Brenda soon realized that writing is, in fact, a thinking process and that she needed to have more faith in her own thoughts and feelings, her own responses. Therefore, rather than continuing to construct essays out of masses of notes she had copied "verbatim," she began to rely upon her own academic centre of reference. And even though active engagement with her material seemed to require more of her, it was not resented, but viewed rather as a necessary part of the new-found control that previously seemed to elude her.

Similarly, Joan recognized that her writing process failed to get at the heart of the matter—to put herself in touch with her own vital nexus of thoughts and feelings out of which effective prose must grow. She abandoned some of her old writing strategies which "put a lot of pressure" on her, such as developing a rigid outline, and demanding of herself a perfect, first and only draft. Instead, she began to keep a journal of ideas, to free-write, and brainstorm, thus allowing herself to discover and explore what it was she wanted to say.

Even Anna, who had, as Don Murray would say, "the feel of writing," (Murray, 1980:67) felt the need to change her writing process. In the past she had a tendency to prune her writing before it had been allowed to take shape Interaction with her students, however, emphasized the value of letting one's work reach a certain maturity before critically analyzing

its content. As well, she provided for longer incubation periods between drafts, thus distancing herself from her writing and making for a more objective view.

In turn, our analyses of the changes that took place in the writing of these three tutors over the year also led us to make some further, more general observations. First, it is clear that there is no one correct approach to writing. Each tutor had an individual style, continued to develop her own repertoire of writing strategies, and yet managed to successfully meet her course requirements. Indeed, our own frame of reference, our individuality, usually determines the choices we make on the macro as well as the micro level: to a great extent what and how one writes is a reflection of who and what one is. This then leads us to ask whether or not there might be a correlation between a particular personality and the quality of writing being produced. For example, did Anna write rich, articulate prose because she had an eclectic personality, because she enjoyed, to paraphrase the poet Tony Connor, "creating a jungle and then exploring it"? (Murray, 1978:87). And will future research actually reveal a correlation between a particular personality or psychological type and preference in writing strategies? For instance, would an "extravert," to use Jung's categories, be more inclined to free write and brainstorm than an "intravert"? Or would it depend upon the task at hand and the nature of the discipline? These and many other questions remain unanswered. What is apparent is that it is imperative to view writers as individuals and to devise our teaching methods accordingly.

Secondly, what we have gleaned from our study of the three tutors is that no matter how much writing experience one may have, writing is rarely easy work. Because we keep growing as writers, our tasks can and do become conceptually more complex. And as they become more complex, the greater the imaginative leaps we, as writers, are required to make. In fact, sometimes we can become lost in the rarefied air of the abstractions—as was the case for Joan and her first history paper—and it may take us a while to find our bearings. Even our most proficient writer, Anna, found that heightened knowledge and experience on many frontiers does not make a writing assignment any easier. The more one knows, the more there is to be assimilated and translated into meaning. The end result may be richer and more dynamic, but there is still the enormous and very often time-consuming task of trying to capture, as Browning would say, "the infinite within the finite." We do, it is true, reach certain levels of discursive maturity; but if our writing tasks do become different, or more complex, we are then required to travel in a new direction—to stretch farther and higher. We never really become

"finished writers" per se, but are continually in a state of becoming—moving into and out of more complex stages of development.

The final observation from this study is that as "teachers, as scholars of writing, we need to be writers, personally embodying the knowledge we explicitly claim" (Watson, 1980:24). Active engagement in the writing process itself is perhaps one of the richest sources of information about the writing process we have to tap. Indeed, this is probably why our Writing Tutorial Service is as successful as it is. We have not just teachers teaching writing, but writers teaching writing—a distinction that is becoming, it seems, more and more significant.

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